

Wisconsin Folks: Masters of Tradition



Wyona Jack was born in 1956 in Tomahawk, Wisconsin and lives in Lac du Flambeau as a member of the Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. She learned birch bark basketry from Archie Mosee and other elders in Lac Courte Oreilles, another Ojibwe reservation in northwestern Wisconsin. Wyona is well-known in the local community for her basketry as well as beadwork, quillwork and making of ceremonial outfits.

Wyona appreciates the historic link baskets provide between the past and present. “Birch bark baskets were made to fit what we needed at the time: winnowing, carrying things, storing food, making canoes. Being a Native American Indian woman, I myself use these baskets for many things: storage, display, exchange, and selling.”

Wyona teaches the entire process of producing a basket, including collecting the bark – first putting down an offering of tobacco, then washing and cleaning the harvested bark with a razorblade, making patterns, preparing molds, and shaping the baskets around the molds. She uses carpet knives and meat-cutting scissors to cut shapes from the bark, mylar to make plastic molds, awls to punch holes in the bark, and sinew to sew the basket parts together. Her apprentice, Patricia Philemon of Lac du Flambeau, has been learning from Wyona for 29 years and was motivated to take the art in new directions. While she can and does make traditional baskets like Wyona’s, Patricia also adapts the form to make such items as lampshades, birdhouses, picture frames, and three-foot model canoes.